

WHAT DOES ABOLITIONISM MEAN FOR ME AND WHY SHOULD I CARE?

Taking an abolitionist approach means radically shifting the way we think about providing for ourselves and living with each other. It means imagining social environments that provide all of us with basic necessities: a safe place to live, enough food, access to medical care for minds and bodies, access to information and the tools with which to understand and use that information, the resources to participate in whatever kind of economy we have, a means of expressing opinions/interests/concerns, and living free of bodily, psychological and emotional harm (both from individuals and from the state).

Can you say that you have access to all these things? Does every one in your community have that same access?

We need to start building the kinds of social environments that will provide these resources for all before we can abolish anything. We need strategies that will keep our communities whole and keep us safe, not ones that rely on punishment, caging, and bodily harm. The environments most of us live in offer us "public safety" that does not serve the entire community, but protects the interests of the state and the rich and powerful. We cannot abolish prisons if we don't have sustainable communities for people to come home to.

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What is Abolition?

- Abolition is a political vision that seeks to eliminate the need for prisons, policing, and surveillance by creating sustainable alternatives to punishment and imprisonment.

- Abolition means acknowledging the devastating effects prison, policing, and surveillance have on poor communities, communities of color and other targeted communities, and saying, "No, we won't live like this. We deserve more."

- Abolitionists recognize that the kinds of wrongdoing we call "crime" do not exist in the same way everywhere and are not "human nature", but rather determined by the societies we live in. Similarly, abolitionists do not assume that people will never hurt each other or that people won't cross the boundaries set up by their communities. We do imagine, however, that boundary crossings will happen much less often if we live in a society that combines flexibility with care to provide for, and acknowledge, people's needs. To do that, we must create alternatives for dealing with the injuries people inflict upon each other in ways that sustain communities and families. **Keeping a community whole is impossible by routinely removing people from it.**

- An abolitionist vision means that we must build models today that can represent how we want to live in the future. It means developing practical strategies for taking small steps that move us toward making our dreams real and that lead the average person to believe that things really could be different. It means living this vision in our daily lives.

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WHAT IS



ABOLITION?

IF NOT PRISONS AND POLICE, THEN WHAT?

If our vision is to eliminate the need for prisons, policing, and surveillance, we must have a clear idea of what we need to make our communities safe and secure. We must make those alternatives realistic and we must be able to begin building them today. We need community alternatives that keep people out of the hands of police and out of prisons and jails, while addressing the fears that people live with on a daily basis. We can do that by building our communities and ending a reliance on, and belief in, law enforcement as the only solution. Here are just a few examples of what those alternatives might include:

- **Community-based economic resources:** Current cooperative economic models provide us with one set of strategies to build our communities. We can create a means for providing meaningful work – and training for that work—to all. This work and training can provide for our housing, food, and clothing, and should contribute to the well being of the community.

- **Community-based education models:** We have examples of small, charter and alternative schools that have been successful in showing us alternative means of educating our community. Community-based schools can offer education to anyone who wants it (youth and adults). Education can be free, participatory, and aimed toward sustaining the kinds of social environments we want to create. They can also model the community forms we want in their teaching practices. Our schools can tailor the learning process to the needs of the students and can involve the adult community in learning and teaching so schools are not isolated from the rest of the community.

- **Community forums:** Some current restorative justice models from around the world provide us with examples of how community mediation and problem solving is used to resolve conflicts and keep our communities safe. We must create a means of dealing with people who hurt each other (physically, mentally, emotionally, materially). We can establish community forums to address grievances people have regarding each other and as a means of resolving those conflicts. Such formations could include community councils that mediate between individuals/groups, community elders to whom community members could go to for advice and counsel, age-, issue-, and interest-specific groups for building community ties (youth groups, artists' circles, support groups, study groups, etc.), to community-based strategies for keeping individuals community members from harming themselves or others and to provide disincentives for repeating such actions. Above all, these groups can grow from the community and their direction and scope should come from the people involved in them and whom they affect.

- **Community Services:** Current community-based organizations provide us with good examples of how services may be provided. We must provide services to those who have difficulty providing for themselves. Such strategies can emphasize not only taking care of those who need the most help, but finding ways to help people get through these systems and come out with both what they need and their humanity and dignity intact. These models can also include working with people who currently provide such services to design workshops, trainings, and ongoing support and resources that go beyond providing indi-

vidual advocacy and services, and emphasize gaining independence from those systems.

- **Medical care:** Current neighborhood clinics and free clinics provide us with good examples of strategies for making free health care available to all. Such services can include basic health (preventative, check ups, acupuncture, etc.), health crises (major medical emergencies, terminal illness), dental and visual health, and mental health (both routine counseling and therapy as well as crisis care and care for the mentally disabled, etc.).

Many of the strategies discussed above are already in place. They are not fantasies, but real life examples of community building and growth.

WHAT CAN I DO?

Abolition means that every time we oppose or try to tear something down, we need to build something sustainable in its place. We can do this by being strategic, by researching not only what the problems are, but also what resources are available. We must look not only at what the state is doing wrong, but what is already available in our communities that could provide economic and social sustainability for all, or what needs to be created and how we will create it. Each step in our organizing must be able to do this.

Being an abolitionist means taking action and putting energy into building our families, neighborhoods—all of our communities. It means creating a firm community foundation for people to come to when we finally tear down all the walls. Together we can do this, but we must believe that it is possible.